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# THE DEGRADATION OF BELARUSIAN FOREIGN POLICY: A PROPOSED COURSE CORRECTION

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# SUMMARY

The participation of Belarus in Russia's aggression against Ukraine, combined with continuing mass human rights violations inside the country, has destroyed the principles of Belarusian foreign policy which have been sacrificed for the survival of the Lukashenka regime.

Despite its geographical position, Belarus's function as a transit state is in decline and its logistical infrastructure less in demand. Its economic model, based on the simultaneous use of the resources of Russia and the West, is being destroyed. Due to the restriction of economic relations with the West, third countries may lose interest in Belarus. Representatives of the most economically active segments of Belarusian society are being forced to leave the country because of the complications of doing business there.

Belarus, from a country that three years ago played the role of something between a buffer and a front-line state in regional geopolitics, is now defined by its extreme dependence on Russia. The Belarusian understanding of foreign policy, as well as Belarusian diplomacy, has "degraded". This situation contradicts public demand: most Belarusians do not see their country as an outpost in the Russia-Ukraine war.

For Belarus, it is impossible to break this foreign policy impasse without internal political changes that would rid the country of its image as a co-aggressor in Russia's war and as Europe's last dictatorship. In theory, democratic transformation is not necessary for this purpose — it is possible that a transfer of power within the current political system and an end to repressions inside the country will be sufficient to reboot relations with the West.

In order to develop a more effective foreign policy, however, it will be necessary to reconfigure the political system, to create a new image of an open Belarus, to establish balance in the relations with countries in both the West and East, and to formulate strategies for the development of relations with the most important states and international organizations. In this context responsibility lies not only with Belarusians, but also with Western countries who should show greater interest in resolving the Belarusian crisis.

There is an urgent need for change in another sphere — the provision of resources for the Belarusian diplomatic service. It is necessary to democratize the process of consideration and decision making in foreign policy, to reform the diplomatic service, and also to reconstruct the system for training, recruiting and rotating specialists in the sphere of international relations.

# INTRODUCTION

Observers have frequently described Belarus as a country at a crossroads, able to pick one direction or the other, or even use both directions profitably. Even in the past, this did not always correspond to the reality, and the word “crossroads” with respect to Belarus today is clearly outdated. The country has been in a dead end since 24 February 2022. The crimes of the Lukashenka regime, both inside and outside Belarus, caused a degradation of the nation’s foreign policy. But the sanctions imposed on Belarus by the West and supported by key Belarusian democratic forces, forced to emigrate to neighbouring countries, led neither to a detente in domestic politics nor to dislodging Belarus from under the Kremlin’s wing — rather it had the opposite effects of those intended.

This analytical paper has two objectives. First, to describe how the foreign policy of Belarus changed in 2020–2022 and the consequences of this for its international relations where there has been an abrupt transformation. Secondly, to outline a new foreign policy for Belarus and formulate ideas on the first steps of implementing a new agenda.

At the same time, the authors did not set out to show how to resolve the domestic political crisis in Belarus — both authors have written detailed notes on this elsewhere and we often discuss the resolution of the crisis both in public and privately.<sup>1</sup> In this document, it is more important that we outline an alternative foreign policy to the one implemented by Aliaksandr Lukashenka and answer a crucial question: why the different stakeholders (including both democratic forces and the pro-government segment, which does not wish to see any further degradation of Belarusian policy) should pursue the alternative.

In an effort to offer a holistic and broad vision, we have devoted a great deal of time not only to drafting the text but also to conducting interviews<sup>2</sup> and discussions with foreign policy experts and practitioners. They all, as well as reviewers, considerably enriched the proposed text and they deserve large appreciation. Many good ideas in this document belong to them, and all the shortcomings — to us.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Matsukevich (2021), *A Belarus strategy for the West*, <https://newbelarus.vision/a-belarus-strategy-for-the-west>; R. Astapenia (2023), *Rethinking Belarus in the context of the war* (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Some of these interviews have been published and are accessible on the website of the Center for New Ideas: <https://newbelarus.vision/tag/puls-lenina-19>.

The first section describes the transformation of the factors that determine Belarus' foreign policy over the past two years: how the regime itself has changed, the separation of Belarusian foreign policy from its geographical determinants, the breakdown of the economic model, the changed role of Belarus in regional security, the deterioration of the country's image, and the deteriorating understanding of foreign policy by Belarusian actors. Last but not least, it analyzes the extent to which foreign policy has come into conflict with public demand.

The second section contains proposals for a new foreign policy. Several subsections are dedicated to the preconditions for developing a new foreign policy, the thematic and geographical priorities of foreign policy, as well as providing the necessary resources for it.

# 1. HOW BELARUSIAN FOREIGN POLICY FUNDAMENTALS HAVE CHANGED IN TWO YEARS

## *Regime escalation*

The functioning of the regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka is a key factor that determines the development of Belarus. Belarus' foreign policy depends on it and recently its influence has resulted in the degradation of foreign policy. In 2020–2021 Lukashenka relied on Russia's support and broke relations with the West in order to suppress dissent in Belarusian society, and in 2022 he supported the Kremlin's military aggression against Ukraine, formalizing Belarus' complicity in the war.

At the same time, the regime understands its own needs in such a peculiar way that it is ready to go against the interests of the country without obvious sense. An example of this was the bomb hoax used to force the landing of a Ryanair flight for the sake of arresting two activists, which did not strengthen Lukashenka's power and instead led to the closure of Belarusian airspace to western airlines and Western skies for Belarusian ones. In other words, it brought significant financial losses.

The increased imbalance in Belarus' relations between Russia and the West is also the result of the international path chosen by Lukashenka having a negative affect (although the Belarusian nomenclature is predisposed to cooperation with Russia much more than with the EU).<sup>3</sup>

In such circumstances, the fundamental documents written by the authorities in the field of foreign policy — the Law on the Main Directions of Domestic and Foreign Policy and even the newly-worded Constitution — do not correlate with the foreign policy of Belarus. Not only documents, but also Lukashenka's actions contradict decisions or statements made even recently.

<sup>3</sup> P. Hansbury (2021), "Domestic Constraints on Foreign Policy Change in Belarus," *The Journal of Belarusian Studies*, pp. 27–55.

The current international path of official Minsk can be compared with ‘flying on one wing’, although for many years local politicians, officials and experts convinced Belarusians of the need for a second one.<sup>4</sup> All this follows from the steps undertaken by the regime for its survival: the extreme tightening of attitudes towards society and adopting the role of vassal in interactions with the Kremlin. The Belarusian democratic forces’ line on sanctions in their international relations, which is formally aimed at resolving the crisis in Belarus, in fact has not yet led to positive changes and only made the position of the regime more entrenched.

## Separation of foreign policy from geography

The elites often consider the geographical position of Belarus to be a curse which, however, also affords it opportunities,<sup>5</sup> and dictates that Belarus is “a meeting place of civilizations, not confrontation.”<sup>6</sup>

The intermediate location between two geopolitical centers of power — the European Union and Russia — is often perceived as the justification for a foreign policy course that involves Belarus’ search for an optimal regional role: as a link between the interests of key actors on the West-East and North-South axes. Belarus had, and to some extent still has, the prerequisites to claim such a role: the absence of territorial disputes with neighbors, excellent transit opportunities and good infrastructure.

However, geography does not exist in a vacuum unaffected by other factors and in the past two years, under the influence of sanctions and political isolation, foreign policy practice has been “separated” from geography. Against this background, the role of Belarus as a transit territory has decreased. The European Union has decided not to finance the infrastructure of transport routes linking the EU with Belarus (and Russia).<sup>7</sup>

An important factor in worsening Belarus’ economic opportunities was the loss of access to transit through the Baltic Sea (via the Baltic states) and the Black Sea (via Ukraine).<sup>8</sup> As a result, Belarusian enterprises can only count on Russian ports and railways, which limits the room for maneuver in relations with Russia and increases transport costs.

This loss of geographical advantages means that the “multi-vector foreign policy” that the authorities still proclaim to follow is simply unrealizable. This must be so all the while Belarus is effectively in hostile relations with four of its five neighbors.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with a foreign expert.

<sup>5</sup> Belarus-1 TV channel (2020), *Interview with Sergey Martynov*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2H9uUCBPcQ>.

<sup>6</sup> Puls Lenina-19 “Pulse of Lenin-19” (2022), Виктор Шадурский. *География и история диктует Беларуси быть местом встречи цивилизаций, а не конфронтации*, <https://newbelarus.vision/puls-lenina59>.

<sup>7</sup> OSW — Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich (2022), *Jak wojna na Ukrainie wpłynęła na szlaki transportowe? Prognozy na przyszłość*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJ8CquLHhE>.

<sup>8</sup> Puls Lenina-19 “Pulse of Lenin-19” (2022), Сяргей Богдан. *Краіна на мяжы страты незалежнасці*, <https://newbelarus.vision/syargej-bogdan>.

Relations with the “far arc” countries of the Global South cannot replace the lost cooperation with the EU and/or balance relations with Russia. The scheme works only if all vectors develop, albeit with different dynamics. To compete and realize its trade and economic interests in Asia, Belarus needs Western technologies and investments, unhindered access to the ports of Ukraine and the Baltic countries, and good relations with Russia, ensuring energy supplies and transport corridors to Asia.<sup>9</sup>

For Asia, represented by China, the high capacity of the railway junction in Brest was of great interest.<sup>10</sup> China was also, and remains, a source of modernization and capital goods for Belarus, but its financing conditions were inferior to those offered by the West.<sup>11</sup> For China, the land route through Belarus is becoming vulnerable and unpredictable due to the risk of full-fledged Belarusian participation in the Russia-Ukraine war.

According to one of the interviewed experts, giving up transit through Belarus is absolutely noncritical for China — the Chinese land transit through all countries to Europe in total accounts for no more than one or two percent of what China transports by sea.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, for Belarus, the loss of Chinese transit will be sensitive. About three billion dollars have been invested in the modernization of the Belarusian railway infrastructure over five years, of which about 1.8 billion was credits. These loans were repaid at the expense of income from cargo traffic.<sup>13</sup>

## Wreckage of the Belarusian ‘business model’

Despite the Soviet image of the Belarusian economy, the country’s economic model is still a market-based model, but with its own specific character — with a large share of the economy public-owned and elements of command administration. According to one of the interviewed experts, many of the functions that small and medium-sized businesses perform in other countries are assumed by state structures in Belarus.<sup>14</sup>

Until 2020, the “business strategy” was to take raw materials from Russia, process them and sell them on to foreign markets. In this model the Western countries played an important role as a source for the modernization of production, purchase of capital goods and financing of such projects (there was competition here with China<sup>15</sup>). Modernized in

<sup>9</sup> П. Мацукевич (2022), *Географ глобус пропил, или как Беларусь убегает от географии*, <https://newbelarus.vision/puls-lenina46>.

<sup>10</sup> П. Мацукевич (2022), *Всепогодному братству противопоказан санкционный климат*, <https://newbelarus.vision/puls-lenina36>.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with a foreign expert.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with a foreign expert.

<sup>13</sup> Белорусы и рынок (2021), *Когда БелЖД озолотится на китайском транзите?*, <https://belmarket.by/news/news-48554.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with a foreign expert.

<sup>15</sup> For example, both the construction of the Svetlahorsk pulp and paper plant and also the modernization of the cement industry were carried out at the expense of Chinese financing and equipment.



this way, public and private production focused both on exports to the CIS and countries in the Global South, as well as on Western markets.

This business model did not imply large investments from Western countries, but within its framework major projects were implemented successfully. Among them are the Stadler plant in Fanipal, the privatization of the mobile operator Velcom, and the arrival of the Austrian company Kapsch. The peculiarity of these projects lies in the fact that decisions on them were made at the very top, without tender or competition, and they were carried out on the basis of separate presidential decrees, which actually created project-specific legal settings.

One way or another, sanctions and isolation from the West broke this business model, depriving Belarus of the premium Western market and the most important maritime transit to the markets of third countries. Even for Chinese companies, business in Belarus was considered to be at a higher risk than previously.<sup>16</sup>

### The dynamics of Belarusian-Russian trade

Russia's weight in commodity trade exceeds the combined share of Belarus' next 100 trading partners.

According to the results of the first half of 2022, exports to Russia amount to \$9 billion, or more than half of all commodity exports from Belarus. In the same period in 2021, Russia's share was slightly more than 40%. The growth in the supply of Belarusian goods to the Russian Federation in the second half of the year may increase Russia's share in foreign trade to 70%.<sup>17</sup>

Trade with Western countries has naturally declined. If in the first half of last year Belarus exported goods to Europe for \$4.5 billion, then for the six months of 2022 exports were a little more than \$3 billion. This is a drop of one-and-a-half times.<sup>18</sup>

It should also be borne in mind that the Belarusian economy is open (at least it has been to date).<sup>19</sup> Over 60% of the products made in Belarus are exported, which makes the country extremely dependent on foreign markets. Such openness orients the national foreign policy towards the country's integration into the world economy and ensuring favorable foreign trade conditions. The unprecedented sanctions imposed by the EU and its allies on entire sectors of the Belarusian economy are the exact opposite of such conditions. As of the summer of 2022, the restrictions imposed by Western countries and allies affected over 35% of Belarusian exports.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Interview with a Belarusian expert.

<sup>17</sup> Экономическая газета (2022), *Беларусь восстанавливает приток валюты*, <https://neg.by/novosti/otkryti/belarus-vosstanavlivaet-pritok-valyuty>.

<sup>18</sup> П. Мацукевич (2022), *Девять ярдов*, <https://newbelarus.vision/puls-lenina65>.

<sup>19</sup> TheGlobalEconomy.com, *Exports, percent of GDP — Country rankings*, <https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/exports>.

<sup>20</sup> Thinktanks.by (2022), *Дмитрий Крук: Наибольшие неприятности таят в себе прямые экспортные санкции*, <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2022/07/21/dmitriy-kruk-naibolshie-nepriyatnosti-tayat-v-sebe-pryamyje-exportnye-sanktsii.html>.

Russia helps to circumvent sanctions. In an attempt to retain the key export positions and partners despite the sanctions, the Belarusian authorities reoriented cargo flows to transit through Russia. This applies to almost all transit of “sanctioned” goods that Belarus trades with third countries, including petroleum products, potash, and timber. Thus, Russia serves not only as the key market, investor, creditor, and monopoly supplier of all energy resources, but now also as the main “window to the world”.

External sanctions are not the only factor affecting the transformation of the economic model. The actions of the regime, by persecuting the private sector and partially squeezing it out of Belarus, also has an effect.

Moreover, back in 2008, Lukashenka set a task for the Belarusian government: to bring the country to the top thirty leaders in terms of doing business in the World Bank’s Doing Business rating.<sup>21</sup> In 2021 the World Bank announced that it would no longer publish the Doing Business report, but by this time, due to repressions and sanctions, it was no longer possible to talk seriously about creating favorable conditions for business in Belarus anyway. In the final Doing Business report, published in 2020, Belarus ranked 49th among 190 states;<sup>22</sup> a good ranking that would certainly worsen against the backdrop of repressions against the private sector.

The last two years have also resulted in an almost complete cessation of cooperation with leading international financial institutions — the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The prospects of joining the World Trade Organization,<sup>23</sup> to which Belarus has been negotiating accession since 1993, have also been eroded. WTO membership would have helped to avoid discriminatory measures against Belarusian products, as well as allow free access to international mechanisms for the settlement of trade disputes.<sup>24</sup>

Another example of ruined economic potential is Belarus’ position in credit risk ratings. For almost 20 years, until 2018, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development placed Belarus in the bottom group, Group VII, together with the poorest countries in the world, and Belarus recently returned to that category.<sup>25</sup>

This is not only about being grouped with the world’s outcasts, but also the price of such a positioning. The lower the grouping, the higher the insurance premium for coverage for Belarusian enterprises provided by OECD member countries. Meanwhile, until 2020 these

<sup>21</sup> Thinktanks.by (2021), *Прощай Doing Business! Беларусь никогда не войдет в Топ-30 рейтинга*, <https://thinktanks.by/publication/2021/09/17/proschay-doing-business-belarus-nikogda-ne-voynet-v-top-30-reytinga.html>.

<sup>22</sup> The World Bank, *Doing Business-2020*, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/32436/9781464814402.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> World Trade Organization, *Joint statement regarding the application from Belarus for accession to the world trade organization*, <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=q:WT/GC/246.pdf&Open=True>.

<sup>24</sup> O. M. (2022), *Зачем Беларуси Всемирная торговая организация*, <https://newbelarus.vision/zachem-belarusi-vto>.

<sup>25</sup> Euler Hermes Aktiengesellschaft (2022), *New country risk classifications for Russia and Belarus*, <https://www.agaportal.de/fokus/russland-ukraine>.

credits were one of the most important sources of funding for modernizing the production sphere of Belarus.<sup>26</sup>

The wreckage of the business model of Belarus, however, does not mean that the Belarusian economy will collapse. After all, the incumbent authorities hope to expand economic cooperation with Russia, which is possible, and the Asian states, which is more difficult. This will allow the Belarusian economy to degrade gradually rather than collapse suddenly.

One of the factors that helps the Belarusian economy keep afloat is access to cheap Russian energy resources: for example, the gas price for Belarus for 2022 is US\$128.52 per thousand cubic meters. This increases the reluctance of the current government to increase the energy security of the country by diversifying energy suppliers or developing renewable energy resources,<sup>27</sup> as well as unpreparedness to change the structure of the economy in favor of a less energy-dependent model.

Meanwhile, as a result of tax integration, Russia even agreed to compensate for the tax maneuver, which, on the one hand, de facto increased the oil subsidy for Belarusian refineries and increased their competitiveness in the Russian market, while, on the other hand, tied the most West-oriented branch of the economy of Belarus to Russia.

Until August 2020, Belarus tried to overcome its dependence on Russia as a monopoly energy supplier by trying to buy oil and gas on the side and expand trade with other countries. “We should not be dependent on one country,” Lukashenka told reporters on 9 August 2020 after voting at the polling station, commenting on the purchase of oil from countries other than Russia.<sup>28</sup> However, after the massive repressions of 2020, and after Lukashenka obtaining support from the Kremlin, as well as the inevitable sanctions imposed by the West in reaction to events, attempts at diversification were stopped.

Although Lukashenka has focused on large industrial production, mechanical engineering and agriculture — industries that little draw on energy and credit resources — dependence on Russian energy supplies is only increasing. The industrial sector of the Belarusian economy accounts for the largest share of energy and fuel consumption, 33%, compared to 10% consumed by the service sector.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, Belarus’

<sup>26</sup> В. Лабодкая (2018). *Сменили группу риска*, [https://www.minfin.gov.by/upload/jurnal/2018/2018\\_03\\_risk.pdf](https://www.minfin.gov.by/upload/jurnal/2018/2018_03_risk.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Belarus is one of the twenty most energy-dependent countries in the world — almost 84% of the energy resources consumed by the country are imported from the Russian Federation.  
Source: National Statistical Committee of Belarus (2021), *Energy Balance of the Republic of Belarus in 2020*, <https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/b65/b65315f91d76adb70baef67c3afb8d9e.pdf>.

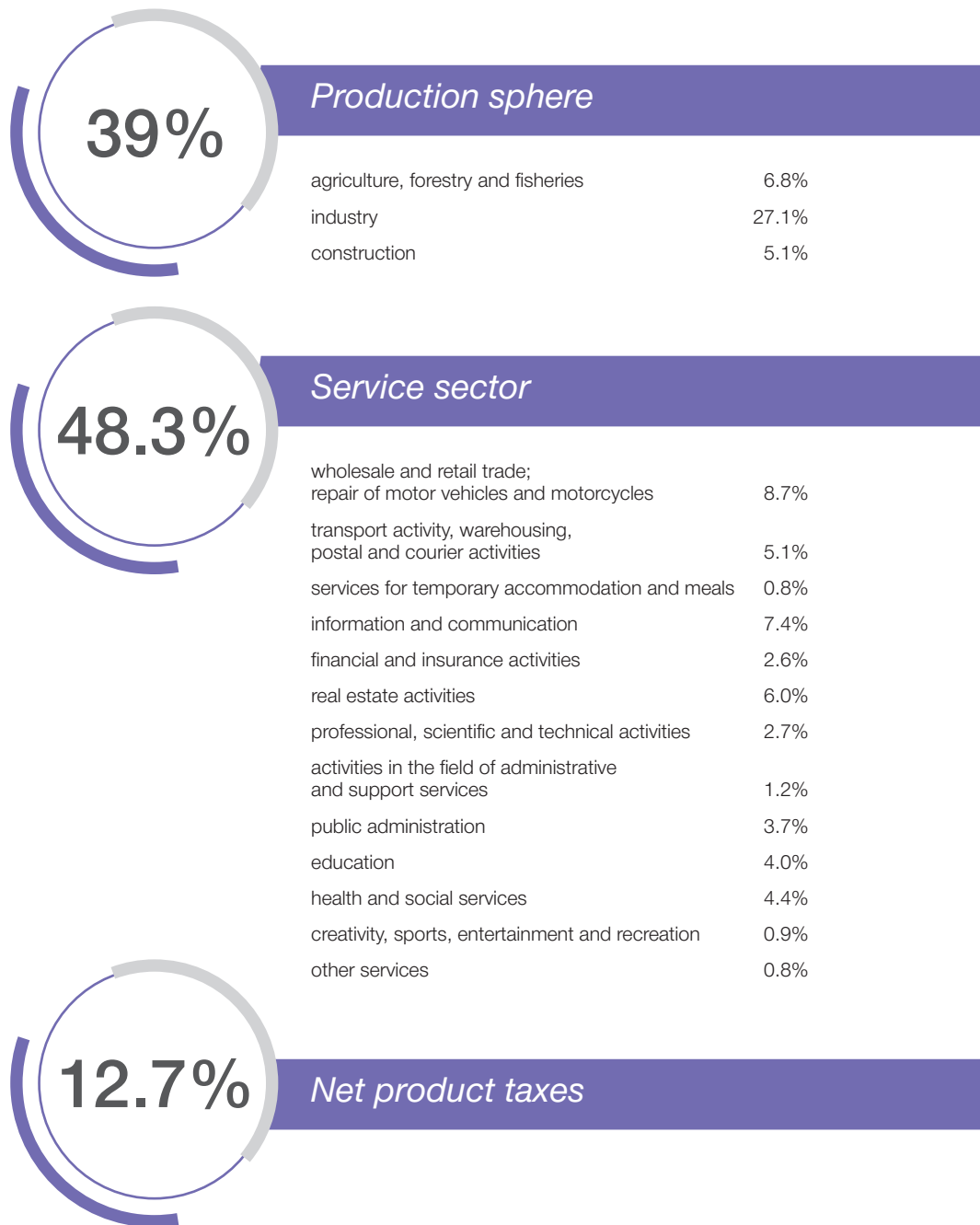
<sup>28</sup> Belta (2020), *Lukashenka: we will buy oil and gas where it is convenient for us*, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-neft-i-gaz-my-budem-pokupat-tam-gde-nam-udobno-402123-2020/>.

<sup>29</sup> National Statistical Committee of Belarus (2021), *Gross consumption of fuel and energy resources in 2020*, [https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/oficial\\_statistika/2020/TEB\\_2020.pdf](https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/oficial_statistika/2020/TEB_2020.pdf).

complicity in Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has dealt a blow to two key sectors—transport and IT.

The EU banned Belarusian transportation companies from transporting goods through the European Union.<sup>30</sup> Companies belonging to the High Technology Park (which in 2021 accounted for \$3.2 billion of export revenue) are reducing employee numbers as foreign customers have begun to abandon everything Belarusian, close offices, and even leave Belarus. Until the crisis year of 2020 Belarus was one of the world leaders in the export of IT services per capita.

**The structure of Belarusian GDP (2021)**



Data:  
National Statistical Committee  
of Belarus

<sup>30</sup> BAMAP (2022), *On restrictive measures of the European Union in relation to road carriers of the Republic of Belarus*, [http://bamap.org/information/news/2022\\_04\\_09\\_181548](http://bamap.org/information/news/2022_04_09_181548).

Last but not least, the longer Belarus remains in its current state, the higher the likelihood that those who emigrated in 2020–2022 will not return. In practice, this means the loss of several hundred thousand people,<sup>31</sup> often the best qualified and those involved in the international market, demonstrating not only a desire but also an interest in Belarus being open to contacts with the international community. This only reinforces the negative demographic trends that exist in Belarus, including an increase in the demographic load ratio, and a decrease in the total fertility rate.

### *Dramatic change in the country's international role: from a regional stabilizer to co-aggressor*

Back in 2020, the Belarusian army conducted exercises on its territory together with the British military,<sup>32</sup> but this, as well as the constructive role of Belarus in the security of Eastern Europe, has already been forgotten. Lukashenka's complicity in Russia's aggression against Ukraine through the provision of military infrastructure and territory, the deployment of Russian military to Belarus, assistance in logistics, supplies from its own defence industry, and other areas have made Belarus not only a threat to the region, but also a legitimate target for attacks by the Ukrainian army.

The unpopularity of the war among Belarusians and the political risks for the regime give reason to hope that the Belarusian army will not take part in the war. Moreover, according to experts, Belarus could field a maximum of about 10,000 troops, but they are certainly not morally-prepared for war and do not have the necessary combat experience.<sup>33</sup> (The special operations forces, however, unlike other branches of the armed forces, are considered sufficiently trained.<sup>34</sup>) At the same time, military spending in Belarus is very modest, amounting to around 1.3% of GDP in 2020 and this level has been maintained for a long time.<sup>35</sup>

Earlier, the role of Belarus in regional security was somewhere between serving as "a buffer zone" and a frontal "advance post of Russia". This contributed to lowering tensions in the region.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> The Polish authorities alone issued 452,730 visas to Belarusians from 10 August 2020 to 20 October 2022. Intex-press (2022), *Сколько виз было выдано белорусам, рассказали в МИД Польши*, <https://www.intex-press.by/2022/10/31/skolko-viz-bylo-vydano-belorusam-rasskazali-v-mid-polshi>.

<sup>32</sup> GOV.UK (2020), *Royal Marines travel to Belarus for winter warfare exercise*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/royal-marines-travel-to-belarus-for-winter-warfare-exercise>.

<sup>33</sup> Chatham House event recording (2020), *How the Russian invasion of Ukraine changes Belarus*, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/research-event/how-russian-invasion-ukraine-changes-belarus>.

<sup>34</sup> КУКУ (2015), *Сколько выдержит белорусская армия, если придут «зеленые человечки»*, <https://kyky.org/pain/proschay-oruzhie-voenny-analitik-o-sostoyanii-del-belorusskoy-armii>.

<sup>35</sup> World Bank, *Military expenditure (% of GDP)*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=BY>.

<sup>36</sup> С. Богдан, Д. Мельянцов, Е. Прейгерман, А. Иванова (2021), *Роль и влияние малых стран в обеспечении мира и безопасности в Восточной Европе. Пример Беларуси*, <http://minskdialogue.by/research/reports/rol-i-vliianie-malykh-stran-v-obespechenii-mira-i-bezopasnosti-v-vostochnoi-evrope-primer-belarusi>.

Number of armed and paramilitary forces of Belarus	Organization	Quantity
	Armed forces	47,950
	Border troops	12,000
	Police	87,000
	Internal troops	11,000
	Reserve	289,500

Data: The International Institute for Strategic Studies (2022), *The Military Balance 2022*, Routledge, London.

Today, Belarus is obviously only a Russian outpost, which, according to the Kremlin, has no right to pursue any independent policy that calls into question the country’s status as an exclusive zone of Russian influence. Despite the fact that the de-sovereignization of Belarus and its role as a co-aggressor are not liked by the Lukashenka regime, this situation does bring certain bonuses in the form of broad economic and political support from Russia. Such support is necessary against the background of the changing business model of Belarus.

### *Simplifying the understanding of foreign policy*

Attempts to formulate the foreign policy concept of Belarus have been made repeatedly, but with zero success. It is difficult to please the political system, the behavior of which is formed situationally and based on the interests and capabilities of the authorities rather than the state. Herein, the lack of a concept as such is not a significant problem if the government’s activities are guided by an effective foreign policy strategy and tactics that reflect national interests, and optimally make use of available possibilities.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the absence of precisely formulated concepts, they were clearly visible at different times in the authorities’ behavior. The foreign policy of Belarus in 2022 looks more like an extension of Russian policy.<sup>38</sup> This concept of subordination was preceded by the era of situational neutrality, the most significant examples of which were the clear non-recognition of either the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or the annexation of Crimea to Russia. These actions emphasized that Belarus retained independence in its foreign policy without preventing Minsk and Moscow from remaining the closest of allies.

The key change in the foreign policy of Belarus in 2022 was the official abandonment of the desire for neutrality. At the All-Belarusian People’s Assembly in 2021, Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei proposed the removal of the provision on neutrality from the Constitution,<sup>39</sup> while Lukashenka himself unequivocally spoke in the same vein.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with a Belarusian expert.

<sup>38</sup> П. Мацукевич (2022), *Республика Белоруссия*, <https://newbelarus.vision/puls-lenina42>.

<sup>39</sup> MFA of Belarus (2021), *Speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus U. Makei at the VI All-Belarusian National Assembly “Foreign Policy Context of the National Interests of the Modern Belarusian State”*, <https://mfa.gov.by/press/statements/d23c4c259dc8de7f.html>.

The new version of the Constitution, which entered into force in March 2022, instead of fixing the desire for neutrality, states that “the Republic of Belarus excludes military aggression from its territory against other states.”<sup>40</sup> This norm was violated by Russia’s aggressive actions towards Ukraine from Belarusian territory a few days before the constitutional referendum, and Russia continues to use Belarus for aggression against Ukraine.

Since Belarusian foreign policy has become simpler and more dependent on the Kremlin, the state is forced to look for other ways to realize its political and economic interests: among other things, the “turn to Asia” and cooperation with the Russian regions come to the fore here.<sup>41</sup> The main achievement so far with regard to the former is the opening of the procedure for Belarus’ accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which strengthens the political legitimacy of Lukashenka against the background of his non-recognition by the West, and gives certain hopes for the growth of economic cooperation.

Lukashenka’s numerous meetings with Russian governors look much more economically successful, but politically flawed. In 2022 alone he met, as if on an equal footing, with the governors of Murmansk, Samara, Kursk, Voronezh, Leningrad, Nizhny Novgorod, Penza regions, Khabarovsk, Primorsky and Perm territories, as well as St. Petersburg. Given the departure of a large number of Western companies from Russia, the current authorities of Belarus hope to occupy their niches.

### Foreign policy goals of Belarus in legislation and international initiatives

The goals formulated in the regulatory and legal documents on foreign policy issues are mainly universal and suitable for most countries of the world. For example, the Law on the Main Directions of Domestic and Foreign Policy contains two strategic goals for Belarus’ foreign policy: 1) protection of state sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Belarus; 2) protection of the rights, freedoms and legitimate interests of citizens, the public and state interests. These priorities set too broad a framework for foreign policy and on their basis alone it is difficult to formulate a foreign policy concept.

With regard to the international legal obligations of Belarus, its disregard for, and manipulation of, such obligations is evident. Lukashenka’s regime does not allow the influence of international law in cases where international obligations require openness and change. At the same time, having defined safe zones for itself (protection of the rights of vulnerable groups, the fight against transnational crime and corruption, the environment, the SDGs and others), Belarus declares its commitment to obligations in these areas for populist purposes.<sup>42</sup> Hence the numerous initiatives that weakly promote the interests of the country,

<sup>40</sup> *The Constitution of the Republic of Belarus* (2022), <https://president.gov.by/ru/gosudarstvo/constitution>.

<sup>41</sup> П. Мацкевич (2022), *Вечера на хуторе близ Лубянки*, <https://newbelarus.vision/puls-lenina67>.

<sup>42</sup> Е. Дейкало (2022), *Беларусь и международное право: от выхолащивания смыслов к добросовестности и предсказуемости*, <https://newbelarus.vision/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Беларусь-и-международное-право.pdf>.

which Belarus has come up with in the international arena. For example, so far the priorities of Belarus in international organizations comprises three blocks of initiatives: “sustainable development”, “combating human trafficking”, and “support for the natural family” (the Belarusian Foreign Ministry uses the word “natural” to mean “additional”).<sup>43</sup>

If “sustainable development” fits into the outline of standard UN priorities, then the reasons why Belarus considers itself a frontman of “combating human trafficking”<sup>44</sup> or “supporting the natural family”<sup>45</sup> are less obvious. These topics do not seem relevant for Belarus, and the opportunities associated with these initiatives to improve the image of Belarus for Western countries (in the case of “combating human trafficking”) or Islamic states (in the case of “supporting the natural family”) do not much help to change the attitudes of these actors towards Belarus. Previous international efforts related to the Chernobyl disaster<sup>46</sup> and the disarmament problem, which logically stemmed from the nuclear-free status and the desire for neutrality enshrined in the previous version of the Belarusian Constitution, looked much more organic.

The deterioration of relations with the West led to a decrease in the role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Belarusian political system, while a change in foreign policy priorities led to changes in the diplomatic representation of Belarus abroad.

The map of Belarusian diplomatic coverage is far from optimal.<sup>47</sup> It has always been a reflection not so much of national interests as of the ceiling of opportunities and connections of the Lukashenka regime at any given time. Since the ceiling was mostly low, and contacts were specific, Belarusian embassies were sometimes located where their presence was economically unpromising, and absent where they were needed. A recent example is closing the embassy in Canada and opening a new one in Zimbabwe.<sup>48</sup>

The next problem is that small diplomatic missions often represent and promote the interests of Belarus in several countries, in many cases covering countries that are large and remote from each other. For example, the Ambassador of Belarus to Egypt is accredited concurrently to Oman, Sudan, Algeria and the League of Arab States; the ambassador in the UAE — to Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait; the ambassador in Vietnam — to Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos. The diplomatic presence of Belarus in

<sup>43</sup> MFA of Belarus, *Belarus' Priorities and Initiatives*, [https://mfa.gov.by/multilateral/priorities\\_initiatives](https://mfa.gov.by/multilateral/priorities_initiatives).

<sup>44</sup> I. Gubarevich (2014), *Combatting Human Trafficking: Belarus Leads International Efforts*, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/combating-human-trafficking-belarus-leads-international-efforts>.

<sup>45</sup> I. Gubarevich (2016), *Fighting for the Traditional Family: Values over Pragmatism*, *Belarus Foreign Policy Digest*, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/fighting-for-the-traditional-family-values-over-pragmatism-belarus-foreign-policy-digest>.

<sup>46</sup> I. Gubarevich (2016), *Chernobyl as Belarus' foreign policy priority*, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/chernobyl-as-belarus-foreign-policy-priority>.

<sup>47</sup> Belarus has established diplomatic relations with 183 countries of the world. The network of foreign missions, as of 15 March 2022, consisted of 70 diplomatic missions: 57 embassies, two permanent missions, ten consulates general and one consulate. Taking into account the accreditation of concurrent ambassadors, Belarus is represented in 105 states. Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, *Foreign Policy of Belarus*, [https://mfa.gov.by/foreign\\_policy/general\\_information](https://mfa.gov.by/foreign_policy/general_information).

<sup>48</sup> П. Мацукевич (2021), *Посол вон или переброска дипломатов на Восток*, <https://newbelarus.vision/puls-lenina33>.



what is effectively a “part-time” format hardly ensures a serious realization of foreign policy goals or the potential in bilateral relations.

Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is considered one of the most professional bodies in Lukashenka’s system, changes in foreign policy exacerbate the harmful practices of Belarusian diplomacy: sham interactions with expert communities, non-transparency of personnel decisions, priority hiring of MGIMO graduates, and low representation of women in the diplomatic service.<sup>49</sup>

## *Deterioration of the country’s external image: from Pyongyang to Geneva and back*

The international image of Belarus was never based on what Belarusian diplomacy promoted, but on the image created by Lukashenka’s actions. The country was perceived above all as “the last dictatorship in Europe” and this image proved tenacious. Even PR paid for by Minsk could not improve its reputation.<sup>50</sup> But the perception changed thanks to the neutral behavior of Belarus after the onset of the crisis in eastern Ukraine in 2014. Minsk for some time cultivated an image of an Eastern European Geneva, but several factors destroyed this beneficial image: complicity in Russia’s aggression, domestic repressions, the forced landing of a passenger plane and the migration crisis on the borders with the Baltic countries and Poland.

The problem of the current image goes beyond having a bad reputation. Belarus finds itself subjected to sanctions and isolation on the part of Western countries and their allies, and those countries not only distrust Lukashenka and are unwilling to have dealings with him, but they also doubt whether Belarus is sovereign at all and whether it is necessary to pay attention to it in general.

As one of the interviewed experts noted, Lukashenka can no longer be relied on — despite the efforts of the West, he overturned everything and broke off relations. The specialist said that Poland, and the European Union more broadly, is counting on changes in Belarus and on dialogue. This includes dialogue between the opposition and the authorities. According to the expert, Lukashenka’s departure from the political scene will open different windows of opportunity. The new leadership will get a chance to talk and negotiate with the West. “If it is not Ivan Tsiartsel, Andrei Shved or another odious person, but someone more or less acceptable, for example, Dzmitry Kruty or Maksim Yermalovich, then different options are possible.”<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> П. Мацукевич (2022), *Послы строгого режима*, <https://newbelarus.vision/puls-lenina53>.

<sup>50</sup> Meduza (2020), *Как британские пиарщики и Березовский пытались помочь Александру Лукашенко сблизиться с Западом*, <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/08/30/kak-aleksandr-lukashenko-pytalsya-podruzhitsya-s-zapadom-pri-pomoschi-britanskogo-lorda-i-berezovskogo-i-pochemu-u-nego-nichego-ne-vyshlo>.

<sup>51</sup> Plus Lenina-19 [“The pulse of Lenin-19”] (2022), *Камиль Клысинский. Нейтралитет ближе к беларусскому менталитету*, <https://newbelarus.vision/puls-lenina63>.

The external image of Belarus has deteriorated not only for the West, but also for other countries. On the one hand, it can hardly be said that China is disappointed in official Minsk owing to sanctions and Lukashenka's international reputation. But it is obvious, on the other hand, that these factors will affect how seriously China will pursue cooperation with Belarus in the future. At the same time, China's interest is usually overestimated in Minsk, although it manifests even in whom Beijing sends to Minsk as ambassadors — these are provincial officials. Thus, China does not make a strategic bet on Belarus, although it has raised the level of relations to an all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership.

Belarus can hardly be of much interest to China as a market. Moreover, the transit opportunities of the Belarusian route from China to Europe are not especially important since sea routes account for the main volumes of China's trade with Europe.<sup>52</sup> Thus, China can determine the importance of Belarus for itself in the context of its ongoing global projects, as well as the need to gain allies in various regions of the world. Practical interest in Belarus may depend on the capacity of the railway junction in Brest, but this factor is not critical.

Finally, it is not possible to ignore the Kremlin's vision of Belarus — it has become so clear that hardly anyone has any doubts about how the Kremlin sees the post-Soviet countries. The way the Russian authorities view Ukraine can more or less be applied to its view of Belarus.<sup>53</sup> The question is what kinds of influence it seeks and by what methods.

As the example of Ukraine, but also Belarus itself, shows, Russia's methods can be unexpected. For example, after August 2020, senior Russian officials discussed how to tie Belarus to the Kremlin: to force upon it a parliamentary republic, create a dominant pro-Russian party, or deploy a Russian military base. In the end, the Kremlin found a more effective way — to make Belarus an accomplice to the aggression against Ukraine.<sup>54</sup>

## Setting off foreign policy against the public demand

Even the war in Ukraine could not radically change the attitude of Belarusians to other countries. It is obvious that opponents of the Russian invasion of Ukraine have developed a worse attitude towards Russia, and the supporters of hostilities a worse attitude towards Ukraine and the West, but at the same time the majority of Belarusians retain a good attitude to all parties to the conflict.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with a Belarusian expert.

<sup>53</sup> Website of the President of Russia (2021), *Владимир Путин. Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев*, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

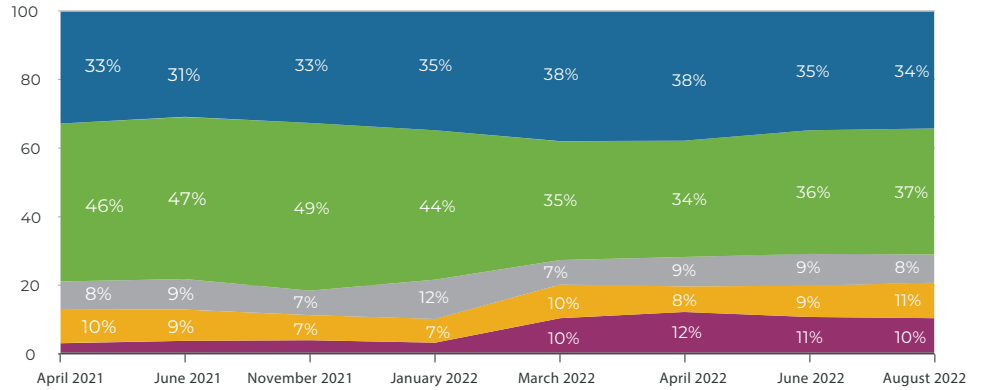
<sup>54</sup> Максим Саморуков. *Беларуси не повезло оказаться в представлении Путина триединым народом вместе с русскими и украинцами*, <https://newbelarus.vision/puls-lenina61/>.

Whatever the reason for this — pragmatism, naivety, friendliness, indifference or something else — the fact remains that Belarusians for the most part do not see themselves as a militant people who hate anyone. Belarusians’ foreign policy identity is such that they wish to maintain friendly relations with other countries.

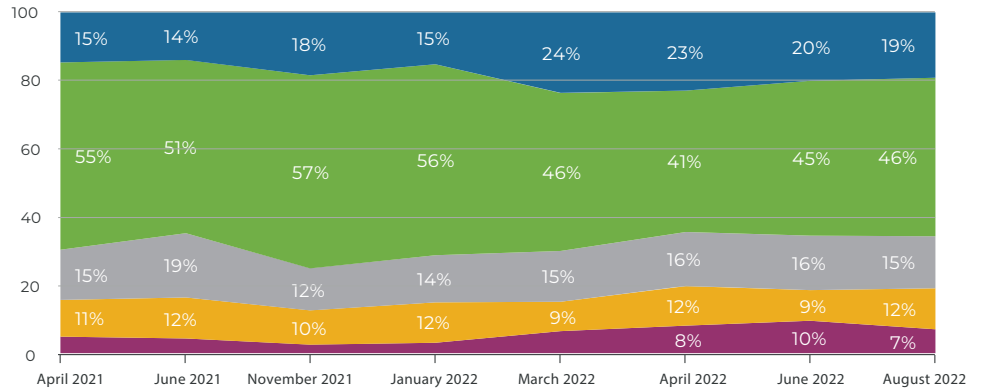
**Diagram.**  
**How do you feel about the following countries?**

- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- I'm not sure
- Somewhat negative
- Very negative

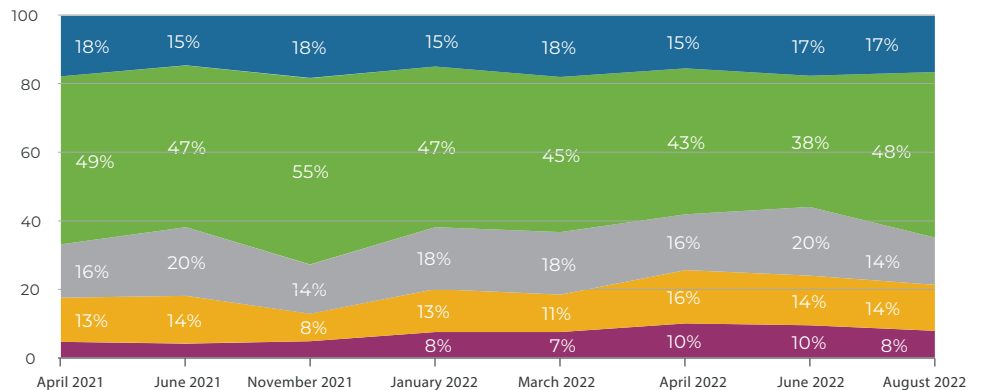
**RUSSIA**



**UKRAINE**

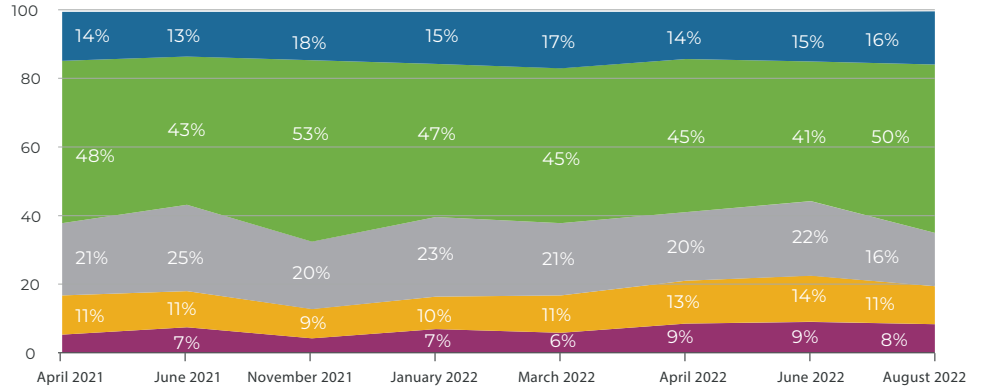


**POLAND**



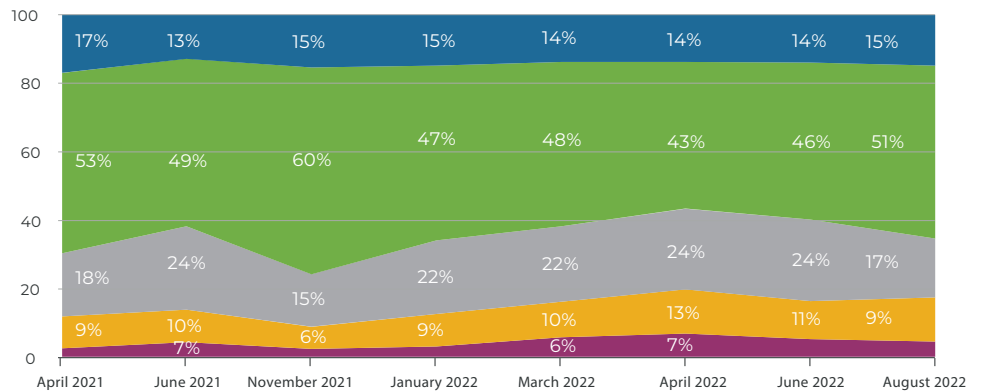
LITHUANIA

- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- I'm not sure
- Somewhat negative
- Vey negative



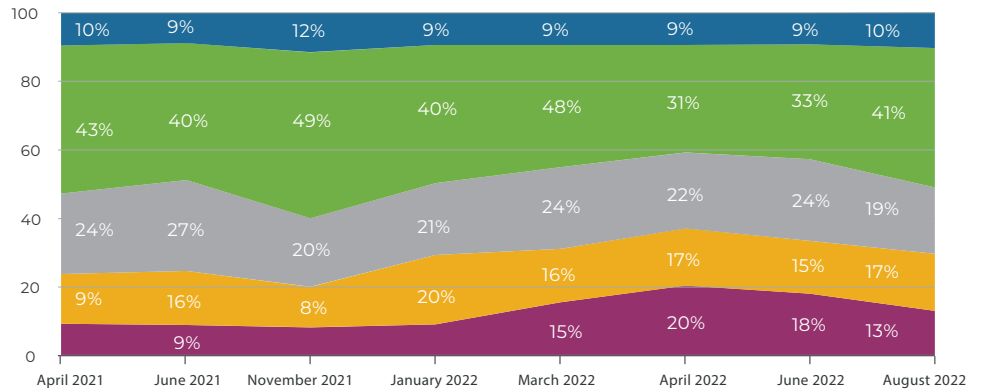
EU COUNTRIES

- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- I'm not sure
- Somewhat negative
- Vey negative



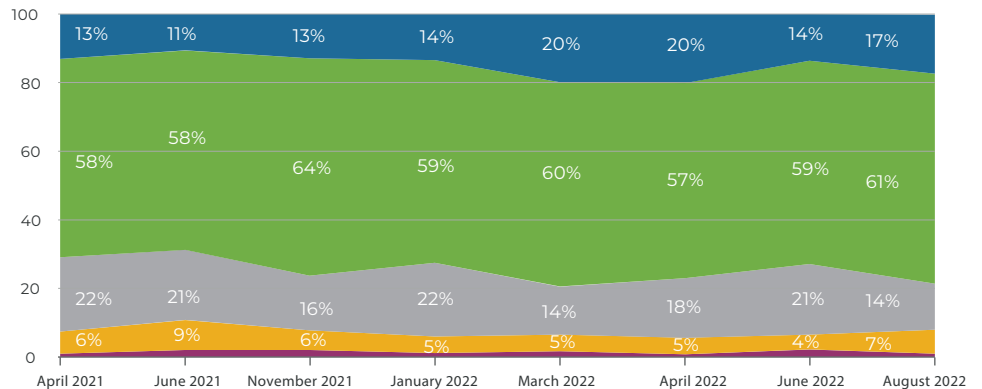
USA

- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- I'm not sure
- Somewhat negative
- Vey negative



CHINA

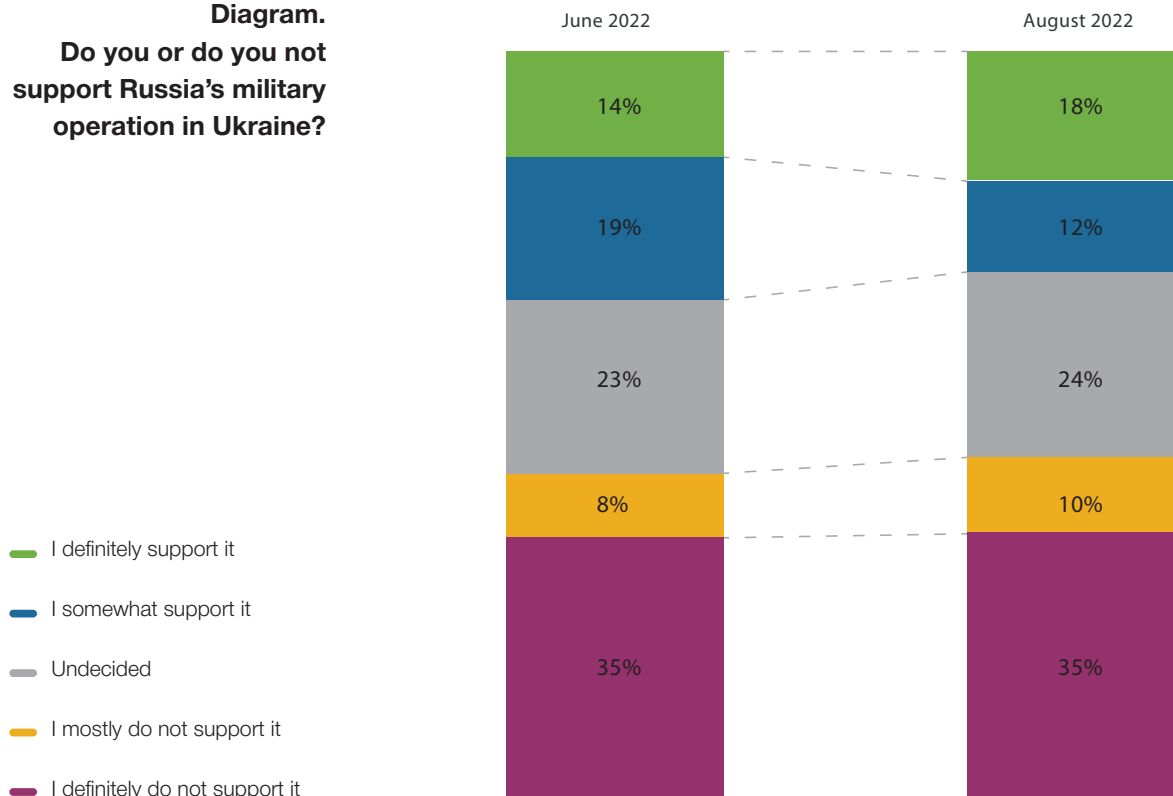
- Very positive
- Somewhat positive
- I'm not sure
- Somewhat negative
- Vey negative



Data: Chatham House polls among the urban population of Belarus using the CAWI method

The preservation of friendly relations with other countries is contradicted by the policy of Lukashenka, who was not elected in the presidential election of 2020 and therefore illegally holds power. This is especially noticeable in his support for Russia’s military actions, which are not popular with the majority of Belarusians, but radically worsen the relations of Belarusians with other countries and will only have negative consequences for Belarus.

**Diagram.**  
**Do you or do you not support Russia’s military operation in Ukraine?**



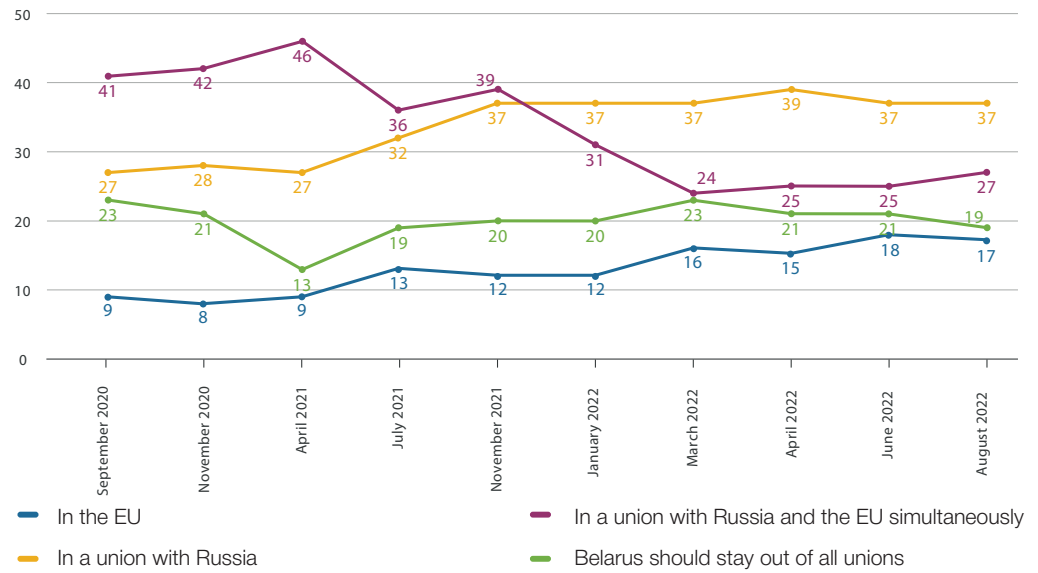
Data: Chatham House polls among the urban population of Belarus using the CAWI method

At the same time, the current situation has still influenced Belarusians’ preferences in choosing a geopolitical union. The situation has forced society to think more rigorously about whom Belarus should build an alliance with in the future. If before the war, when asked what kind of union Belarus should be in — in a union with Russia, in the European Union, in a union with Russia and the EU simultaneously, or remain outside geopolitical unions — two-thirds of respondents in public opinion polls chose the last two “neutral” options, now half chose these options.

If the war could not radically change the opinion of Belarusians that it is necessary to be in friendly relations with both the West and Russia, and not to develop only one vector, then this choice is likely to remain stable in the medium term. Moreover, this idea has been

living in Belarusian society and elites for more than a century.<sup>55</sup> Rather, the question is how to arrange these relations in practice without significant distortions in one direction or the other (which today seems impossible) and to reconcile the motivations of the expressively pro-Russian<sup>56</sup> and pro-Western<sup>57</sup> parts of society.

**Diagram.**  
In which geopolitical union is it better for Belarus to be?



Data: Chatham House polls among the urban population of Belarus using the CAWI method

<sup>55</sup> І. Абдзіраловіч, *Адвечным шляхам*, [https://knihi.com/lhnat\\_Kanceuski/Adviecznym\\_slacham.html](https://knihi.com/lhnat_Kanceuski/Adviecznym_slacham.html); Л. Акіншэвіч. *Непрыкметны чалавек у «праклятым» стэпе*, <https://budzma.org/news/le-akinshevich.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Г. Коршунаў (2022), *Чаму беларусы выбіраюць Расію, а не Еўропу?*, <https://newbelarus.vision/chamu-vybirayuc-rasiyu>.

<sup>57</sup> Г. Коршунаў (2022), *Чаму беларусы выбіраюць Еўропу, а не Расію?*, <https://newbelarus.vision/chamu-belarusy-vybirayuc-europu>.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

By and large, little is required of Belarus' foreign policy — it must guarantee security and sovereignty, as well as provide favorable conditions for development and economic growth. But over the past three years, Belarusian foreign policy has become increasingly detached from these national interests and from the region more generally.

The recommendations presented below are addressed to those Belarusian stakeholders who do not agree with the policy of the current regime: the democratic movement and more liberal segments of the current political system, those who would like to see Belarus as a sovereign, developed and non-confrontational state. A rapprochement between such groups is possible as the transformations in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe show, even if it appears unrealistic today.

It should be borne in mind that these recommendations are written during the war — that is, their shelf life is most likely limited due to possible external influences. Therefore, in this section we would like to outline the ideas broadly enough to allow different stakeholders to adapt them to changing conditions.

## Precondition

- *Reboot the political system*

Overcoming Belarus' status as a pariah state and building an effective foreign policy is hardly possible without the departure of Aliaksandr Lukashenka, ridding the country of his repressive apparatus and putting to bed the status of co-aggressor in Russia's war. The ideal option is the democratization of the political system with the restoration of the rule of law and effectively-functioning branches of power. But it is extremely unlikely that in Belarus and in the region in the foreseeable future there will be conditions conducive to ideal transformations.

Consequently, even the transit of power from Lukashenka to another person within the framework of the current political system in Belarus will already be progress that can open up new opportunities. The main irritant for the EU, the United States and its allies is not the system itself, but Lukashenka personally. It can be expected that the emergence of a new person at the head of the current political system, someone who did not play an active part in the crimes of the regime and did not use mass repression, will at least allow the easing of confrontation with the West.

## Thematic priority of foreign policy

- **Create a new image — open Belarus**

Belarusian stakeholders should understand that many external actors consider it rational, if not economically, then at least politically to limit ties with Belarus. Even after full or partial changes in Belarus, this approach may persist if external actors do not see the long-term nature of the changes. To reverse this attitude, Lukashenka's successors will need to contrast the image of Belarus under Lukashenka with a new image. It will be easier to personify the new image, which we call the "open Belarus" image, if democratic forces accede to power.

This image should be supported by actions in the economic and military-political spheres which need to outweigh the inertia of various political and economic actors predisposed "not to interact with Belarus". Belarus should therefore radically simplify economic cooperation and intensify efforts in the field of regional security.

Simplification of foreign economic cooperation is interrelated with the change of the economic model of Belarus. The country needs to build an economy attractive to international business. At the same time, it is necessary to help Belarusian businesses to enter international markets.

The concept of "open Belarus" involves several components:

- **Openness of doing business.** Belarus should become a preferential zone for doing business. It should be attractive for transactions, launching new businesses, investing, and developing its financial market. It is necessary to abandon the creation of separate free economic zones, and instead to extend adequate legislative and tax practices to the whole country. These steps could help Belarus to become a European hub in services and manufacturing<sup>58</sup>.
- **Openness to foreigners.** Belarus should have a visa-free regime for citizens of developed countries (without the exception of certain Western countries and the presence of conditions such as entry through land border crossings only for citizens of neighboring states). It should also simplify migration and naturalization procedures, as well as grant citizenship to foreigners with Belarusian roots.
- **Rule of law and political stability.** Belarus, as a state interested in attracting foreign investment, needs to establish as soon as possible clear and predictable rules for doing business and protecting investments. The primary task is to bring the national legal system in line with international standards by introducing legal instruments and institutions generally accepted in developed jurisdictions, but new for Belarus (for example, elements of English law, some of which are already in force for residents of

<sup>58</sup> Interview with a foreign expert.



the High-Tech Park). It is important to ensure the protection of investments both at the national level by building an independent judicial system, and at the international level by actively developing international treaties for the protection of foreign investments and ensuring investors' access to international dispute resolution mechanisms (commercial and investment arbitration).

At the same time, despite the relatively developed investment legislation, taking into account the reputation of Belarus as a country of “legal default”, it is necessary to focus not only on legal and judicial reforms, but also on political actions designed to show Belarus as a stable legal state that respects private property and provides guarantees to investors.

- **Infrastructure development.** Even if the volume of goods transported between the European Union and Russia does not reach pre-war levels for a long time, Belarus should invest in improving transport infrastructure and connectivity with other international transport routes, including sea routes.
- **Attraction of international financial institutions and donors.** International financial institutions and development programs should see in Belarus an opportunity to bring about change while spending their resources transparently and efficiently. Belarus should also join the World Trade Organization.

If measures to simplify economic activity are likely to be perceived favorably, then the prospects for Belarusian efforts in the field of security are vague — even if tomorrow Belarus launches the process of transit of power and stops participating in Russia's aggression against Ukraine. At the same time, it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of Belarus in the European security architecture; the war has only confirmed its importance. Therefore, if Belarus can once again show itself as a responsible participant in regional security, then external actors (with the exception of Russia) will be interested in supporting these initiatives to one degree or another.

Measures should include not only immediate steps, such as declaring a neutral position in the war and holding regular security conferences, but also longer-term solutions. This could be an international agreement which institutionalizes neutral status. It could be an act or declaration of international recognition of, and guarantee by key world powers to protect, the neutrality, security and nuclear-free status of Belarus, in particular the mechanism for their implementation.<sup>59</sup> The West should also be interested in this as a way to expand the corridor of opportunities for Belarus and, accordingly, a mechanism for reducing the Kremlin's control over Minsk. The Belarusian democratic forces, which have established good contacts with the EU and the United States, can make a significant contribution to this process, conveying the need to separate Belarus and the regime.

<sup>59</sup> R. Astapenia, P. Matsukevich (2021), *Is Neutrality Possible for Belarus?*, <https://newbelarus.vision/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Is-Neutrality-Possible-for-Belarus.pdf>.

The promotion of the image of Belarus as an open country should be subordinated to international initiatives put forward by Minsk in global and regional international organizations, as well as work with the diaspora which to a large extent forms the image of Belarus abroad.

## Geographical priorities

- *Ensure balance in relations with the West and the East*

On the one hand, the continuation of integration with Russia may sooner or later lead to the loss of independence for Belarus. On the other hand, attempts to escape from the Russian sphere of influence and the westernization of Belarus could lead to a war with Russia. For these reasons, Belarus is forced to balance.

The weakening of Russia as a result of the war with Ukraine in theory increases the chances of a successful exit of Belarus from the Russian sphere of influence. In practice, a Russian defeat in the war will not necessarily provide Belarus with more opportunities for a successful exit from the control of the Kremlin if the latter decides to compensate for the failure of the “special operation” by annexing Belarusian territory. Within the framework of this negative, but quite realistic scenario, there are two prospective courses of events. In the first, Lukashenka’s regime bows to incorporation into Russia. In the second, the regime, having co-opted the support of the West, resists. (At the time of writing, Western states did not believe that Lukashenka could be used against the Kremlin.)

Belarus is forced to seek a balance in relations with Russia and the West for other pragmatic reasons as well: many countries show practical interest in Belarus as a transit hub between Europe and Russia, or between Europe and Asia. In this sense hardly anything fundamental will change, even if a coup happens in Russia resulting in the establishment of a full-fledged liberal democracy.

The search for a balance depends on the possibilities of reducing Russian influence in Belarus and restoring relations with the EU and the United States. This should be done not by contrasting one vector with another or by targeted displacement, but by pulling up some relations to the level of others. As long as Russia acts as the dominant market, investor and sponsor of the Belarusian economy, the influence of Russia on the domestic and foreign policy of Belarus will prevail. Belarusian stakeholders will therefore need to seek significant preferential measures from the West (it is obvious that with democratization this is feasible, while with the transfer of power within the current system it will be difficult to achieve even the lifting of sanctions).

In the case of the nearest “western” neighbors, like Poland, the Baltic states and Ukraine, it is necessary to develop bilateral roadmaps for the intensification of relations, habitualize regular contacts and consultations in all spheres of interest, and resume Belarus’ participation in the Eastern Partnership and cross-border cooperation programs of the EU.

## What should be done in relations with Russia and the West

### What should Belarus do in relations with Russia?

Belarus should: guarantee the preservation of the status of the Russian language as a state language; maintain the format of consultations in various areas; guarantee the non-deployment on the territory of Belarus of military facilities belonging to third countries and military blocs; and preserve the main trade, financial and other preferences for the Russian actors provided within the framework of the Union State and the EAEU, regardless of the future fate of these integration formats.

### What should Belarus do in relations with the West?

Belarus should: seek the removal of all restrictions and preferential treatment in trade and investment; conclude agreements on partnership and cooperation; ensure accession to the WTO and a high level of cooperation with international financial institutions; diversify sources of energy supply, striving for a compromise on the purchase of electricity from the Belarusian nuclear power plant.

- *Formulate strategies for developing relations with each region, major countries and international organizations*

It is necessary to conduct a “revision” of each region and assess which states should be prioritized as of the greatest interest for Belarus (in terms of politics, trade, economics, and resources). Cooperation with those states identified needs to be developed, including by strengthening the diplomatic and trade presence of Belarus in them. Regional cooperation (especially with such large countries as China or Turkey) offers genuine prospects: the use of Belarusian transit and logistics provides opportunities of acting as a trade gateway to the EU for China<sup>60</sup> and India, as well as in the EAEU for Turkey (although the importance of the Belarusian direction for these countries should not be overestimated).

A differentiated approach to the development of relations should be used. Accents on politics, economics or the humanitarian sphere should depend on the capacity of a particular country or region. At the same time, to work in these areas, professional personnel are needed who know not only languages, but also the basics of intercultural communication<sup>61</sup>. This applies to the entire system of international relations of Belarus, from neighboring countries to partners in the far arc.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with a Belarusian expert.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with a Belarusian expert.

## Resource support

- *Democratize the process of discussing foreign policy options*

It will be important for an “open Belarus” to win the trust of its international partners so that they believe in the credibility of its foreign policy. This requires opportunities not only for international communication between diplomats and experts, but also for dialogue on significant issues within Belarus with the involvement of the research community. External actors need to see that government decisions are the result of open and fact-based discussions and are therefore relatively sustainable.

Other goals of democratization are to strengthen the integrity of the Belarusian political elite and the recognition of the right of political actors to be co-authors of the country's foreign policy. Belarus, as a medium-sized state by European standards, needs a consolidated elite, especially in conditions whereby state documents in the field of foreign policy, for example in relation to Russia, will be somewhat abstract, and policy coordination will depend in part on the ability of political actors to read between the lines.

- *Reform the diplomatic service*

The emphasis of Belarusian diplomacy needs to be shifted from treating the promotion of exports as its main task to prioritizing the development of political dialogue and the affirmation of a positive image of Belarus. This will create a long-term favourable framework for the development of all types of cooperation, including trade, economic ties and investment.

The map of diplomatic presence should be based on the long-term goals and interests of Belarus and the corresponding strategies for the development of relations with specific countries, regions and international organizations. At the same time, it is necessary to proceed from the assumption that a priority for development is cooperation with Europe, primarily neighboring countries, and the key states in each region.

Belarus needs to decentralize the Foreign Ministry's operations, including the delegation of greater powers to foreign missions and specific employees, in order to increase their initiative and encourage innovative approaches.

Also among the areas for improvement of the diplomatic service are: increasing the representation of women and increasing transparency of the appointments process; more active use of foreign lobby institutions — diaspora, honorary consuls, parliamentary friendship groups, friendship associations, business councils, commissions and specialized working groups; increasing public diplomacy and strengthening effective feedback through social networks, as well as intensifying cultural diplomacy; and improving consular assistance to citizens anywhere in the world through the expansion of the diplomatic network, honorary consuls and the digitalization of procedures.

- *Rebuild the system of training and employment of specialists in the field of international relations*

A range of possible models exist for training diplomats and experts in the sphere of international relations, but the aim in adopting one should be for a system of employment that is transparent and competitive.<sup>62</sup> Short-term solutions should concern the professionalization of the Foreign Ministry team by making use of the national school of diplomacy — the Faculty of International Relations of the Belarusian State University. MGIMO, a Russian institution, cannot be the primary source of personnel in the Belarusian Foreign Ministry and hiring policy should not privilege MGIMO graduates (although neither MGIMO graduates nor graduates of Western universities should be discriminated against either). In the medium and long term, it is worth developing a state program to train young people in the best foreign universities (for example, by analogy with “Bolashak” in Kazakhstan).

To increase the expert level and experience, it is necessary to ensure the circulation of personnel between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, other government bodies, enterprises, business and science. Professionals should be able to rotate in different communities, and such movements should be institutionalized and encouraged.<sup>63</sup> In practice, this means that there should be no obstacles to the transfer of personnel between the conditional BSU, Belshina and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

It is also necessary to create an analytical center affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus (or the government), which could serve not only practitioners and experts, but also the wider public — the media, politicians, and students. Similar think tanks exist in all European countries. At the same time, this institution should enjoy sufficient freedom of action not to turn into the existing system of operational and analytical organizations, which act only as components, albeit more intellectual, of state propaganda.

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<sup>62</sup> An interview with a Belarusian expert.

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# ABOUT THE CENTER FOR NEW IDEAS

The Center for New Ideas is a think tank devoted to developing ideas on how to take advantage of the opportunities and respond to the challenges that Belarus faces in the 21st century.

Our mission is to help political and civic organisations build a more open, prosperous and resilient Belarus. We go about this by engaging with society to discuss reforms and supporting independent research and future leaders.

Dr. Ryhor Astapenia is the founder and research director of the organization and Anton Radnianski is its executive director.

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